

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AS A MODEL  
OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE:  
THE EXPERIENCE OF ZIMBABWE

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## Introduction

This paper examines the use of a social development model in the practice of social work in Zimbabwe. The paper begins by defining social development before making a case for a social development model in Zimbabwe. The paper then looks at the operationalisation of social development in Zimbabwe.

### Social Development Defined

The term social development emerged as a result of dissatisfaction with a development model that puts undue emphasis on economic growth at the neglect of social factors. Economic growth had not necessarily resulted in an improvement in the welfare of the people. Thus social development emerged as an attempt to draw attention to the importance of social factors in the development process. In view of this, it is therefore not surprising that there is no precise definition of social development. Dominelli (1997:29) agrees that the term is diverse and she defines social development 'as a dynamic way of organising resources and human interactions to create opportunities through which the potential of all peoples - individually and collectively, can be developed to the full'. With this definition, Dominelli sees social development as a model that can be used to address the problem of poverty and underdevelopment.

Another definition of social development is provided by Midgley (1995) who perceives it 'as a process of planned social change designed to promote the well-being of the population as a whole in conjunction with a dynamic process of economic development' (p25). Thus Midgley sees social development and economic development as interdependent. In other words, social and economic factors of development reinforce each other and no meaningful development can occur without due regard being given to both factors. Midgley's definition emphasises that social development is a process of change directed at conditions which prevent groups and communities from realising their potential.

The two definitions point to the fact that social development as a model of practice underscores the importance of macro policies in changing those conditions or structures that undermine the welfare or well being of the people. The social development model therefore challenges the status quo with a view to ensuring that the environment becomes more responsive to human needs. It is also clear from the two definitions that developing countries provide sufficient scope for implementing a social development model.

As Midgley (1995:70) observes, 'social development does not have a well developed body of theory'. However, the modernisation theory of development is often used to understand the causes of underdevelopment. According to the modernisation theory, traditional values and institutions create conditions of underdevelopment. The modernisation theory argues that underdeveloped societies should be transformed into modern societies using the experiences of the developed countries. Rostow's theory as explained by Midgley (1981) that all societies should pass through the common stages of economic development, is pertinent. The modernisation theory also assumed that the benefits of economic development would trickle down to the people in the form of employment, higher wages and social security. This then would improve the standards of living.

The starting point for the social development model is that the modernisation approach has failed to transform developing countries. The benefits of economic development have not trickled down to the majority of the people. Instead the wealth is concentrated in the hands of few people while the majority live in absolute poverty.

Social development is different from community development in that it puts more emphasis on macro level policies and intervention strategies unlike community development which focuses on the micro-level. Social development also calls for the active participation or intervention of government unlike in community development where the government takes a passive role, expecting communities to determine and implement the changes they need to see at local level without reference to the centre. Another major distinguishing characteristic between social development and community development is that unlike community development, social development concerns itself with making rights accessible to all. As Dominelli (1997:37) observes, 'a new vision of social development, therefore, has to be rooted in making certain rights accessible to every individual on this planet regardless of who they are or where they are.' Social development therefore takes a global perspective.

The value base of social development is informed by the belief in the worth and dignity of the human being. Consequently, it considers all human beings as equal who should therefore be given equal opportunities for realising their potential. Furthermore, social development seeks to ensure that individuals have access to resources necessary for meeting basic needs and in conditions that do not undermine their self-esteem. The pursuit of social justice and egalitarian ideals is at the core of the social development model.

The principles of social development are related to social work in that what they seek to achieve with social development is also what social work seeks to achieve, namely the concern with improving human well-being. In improving human well-being, both social development and social work recognise the need to make human rights accessible to all in the interest of equity and social justice. Thus, they both seek to empower the people and as Dominelli (1997: 35) observes, 'this may mean challenging existing social relations and changing the distribution of power and resources'. Both social development and social work are concerned with harmonising the relationship between individuals and their environment. The maintenance function of social work is, however seen as being out of step with the social development model since it perpetuates the social exclusion of the poor and vulnerable groups.

#### The Case for a Social Development Model in Zimbabwe

In order to appreciate the case for a social development model in Zimbabwe, it is necessary to understand this within the context of the country's colonial history. Zimbabwe was colonised by the British in 1890 and the colonial government immediately adopted a policy of racial segregation. The policy of racial segregation promoted the supremacy of the white population whilst marginalising the African population. For instance, the colonial government adopted what is referred to as the 'white agriculture policy' designed to promote agricultural activities undertaken by the white settler community by providing them with extension services, land and credit facilities (Stoneman 1981). The same services and facilities were not made available to

the African population. In fact, the African people had their land appropriated under the Land Apportionment Act of 1930. In pursuance of the white agricultural policy, the colonial government enacted the Maize Control Act of 1931 which stipulated that African farmers were not to receive the full market value of their crops (Stoneman 1981).

Thus white agricultural policy had the effect of destroying African agriculture and by so doing destroying the African population's source of sustenance. The resultant problems of landlessness, impoverishment and overpopulation forced rural people to migrate to urban areas in search of income-earning opportunities. Unfortunately, the urban areas were not ready to receive such an influx and migrants had difficulty in securing employment, shelter and food. These people easily became destitute in the urban areas and were subject to the intervention of social workers. Unfortunately, the task of social workers became that of repatriating the urban destitute to their rural homes. Of course, this did not solve the problem of poverty, if anything, it only aggravated the problem. In this respect, social workers were simply operating as agents of social control.

It should be noted that as far as the Africans are concerned, land has cultural, social, economic and political significance. It is the land that defines the identity of the African people and provides the link between the living and the dead. It is also for this reason that the land issue was the rallying point for the war of liberation. It is, therefore, not surprising that many African people are still bitter that they were forcibly removed from the land of their ancestors. They are also still bitter that about 4,600 white farmers from the white population, which constitutes about 0.8% of the country's total population, own about 43% of the land in Zimbabwe. This has sharpened the racial divide in Zimbabwe. However, unlike the situation in Western countries, the colonial legacy in Zimbabwe has resulted in a situation where the minority white population dominates the majority African population. The majority population has political power whilst the minority population has economic power. The minority therefore uses their dominant economic power to resist redistributive policies.

The implementation of the economic structural adjustment programme in 1991 accentuated the problem of poverty in Zimbabwe. The poor performance of the economy and a growing debt burden forced the government to accept the International Monetary Fund and World Bank prescription for ailing economies, that is, structural adjustment. Structural adjustment entailed restructuring of the economy in order to achieve sustainable levels of economic growth which would ultimately improve the standards of living. The structural adjustment programme has impacted negatively on the welfare of the people. Of particular concern is the worsening of the unemployment problem. Both the public and private sectors have been retrenching their workers on a larger scale. A total of 60 000 workers had lost their jobs by the mid 1990s (Kaseke, 1998). The liberalisation of the economy is forcing local enterprises to compete with their foreign counterparts resulting in them being driven out of business. Apart from worsening the problem of unemployment, structural adjustment has also resulted in high inflation and steep price increases. Added to this is the burden of cost recovery occasioned by the need to reduce the budget deficit which means people now pay for social services.

This is not unique to developing countries only but parallels can be drawn with the experiences of some Western countries where there has been pressure on welfare regimes to yield to economic considerations. Dominelli cites the example of Britain which had its own brand of structural adjustment called 'Treasury control' and this resulted in a situation where 'social policies and welfare provisions were subordinated to economic exigencies' (1997:30).

When social work was introduced during the colonial period, it represented a wholesale transfer of social work models from Britain. Social work was introduced initially for the benefit of the white settler community (Kaseke, forthcoming). The idea was to enable the white settler community to enjoy the same services enjoyed by their kith and kin in Britain. It was only felt necessary to extend social work services to the indigenous population at a later stage. However, when social work services were introduced to the indigenous population, they were inferior and only served to perpetuate their marginalisation. The intervention strategies were mainly directed at the urban population at the neglect of the rural population. There was therefore a deliberate neglect of the rural population on the assumption that their needs were simple and easily satisfied within the traditional structures.

The intervention strategies were remedial in orientation and only offered palliative measures. The intervention strategies assumed that social problems were caused by the failure of individuals to adjust to their environments, particularly within the context of rural-urban migration. It was believed that new migrants in the urban areas had problems of adjusting to their new environment. As Midgley (1981:105) observes, 'social problems are conceptualised in social work as individual maladjustments and it is the social worker's primary goal to treat these emotional difficulties and problems by interpersonal relationships'.

Casework was used as the main method of intervention, the focus being on enabling the individual to realise adequate social functioning. However, this mode of intervention did not enhance adequate social functioning as it assumes that the individual is to blame for his/her problems yet in many instances the problem can be attributed to the environment. This is why Kaseke (1991:44) argues that, 'social work has not been able to differentiate between individual and social causation.' Consequently, inappropriate intervention strategies have been applied with too much emphasis placed on helping individuals cope with their social problems and thereby suggesting that there is nothing that can be done to alter an individual's circumstances.

Social workers have however, been frustrated to discover that the social problems they are handling emanate from ignorance and underdevelopment yet they are unable to address these problems. As a result, social workers have been dealing with symptoms rather than the root causes of the problems. This realisation has made Ankrah (1986:63) to conclude that the residual model of social work is a 'deficient vehicle, not only to change the material welfare of poor rural people, but to address the larger issues of social development.' Thus in order to change the material welfare of the poor, there is need for intervention at both the macro and micro levels.

At independence, it was felt that social work in Zimbabwe needed to transform itself so that it could contribute to the material welfare of the poor. For instance, traditional practice of providing public assistance to destitute members of society has failed to make an impact on the

amelioration of poverty. This is because social workers have tended to provide public assistance as an end in itself rather than as a means to an end. Consequently, public assistance has failed to improve the circumstances of the beneficiary populations. The issue of exit strategies for the recipients of public assistance has not been given sufficient attention. Although there have been attempts to introduce community development as a vehicle for promoting development at local level, these have not been successful owing to the failure by government to empower communities for self-reliance. It should be appreciated that self-help initiatives are successful in instances where deliberate efforts are also made to build the capacity of communities for self-reliance. Local development efforts need to lock into a national framework for social change and the social development model can provide such a framework.

Thus the social development model represents a shift from the residual model. A social development model sees the role of social work as that of facilitating social change and ultimately enabling individuals to realise their potential.

### Social Development Operationalised

The implementation of the social development model has revolved around developing strategies for improving the material welfare of the poor. In this regard, social workers have become agents of social change, enablers and facilitators of development. As Dominelli (1997:35) observes, this 'requires social workers to reinterpret their professionalism - away from the detached bureaucrat or technician into the well-informed activist who cares about and for others'.

The poor and marginalised groups have been specifically targeted with a view to enhancing their productive capacity. With respect to the rural poor, it has been accepted that the root causes of their poverty include landlessness or inadequate land, lack of access to credit facilities and extension services. Social workers have joined hands with churches, human rights organisations and the rural poor themselves to lobby government to address the land issue. Although the land issue was the principal cause of the war of liberation, this problem has not been seriously addressed nineteen years after independence. At independence, the government announced that 62 000 families were to be resettled but only 45 000 families had been resettled by early 1989. The government has attributed the slow pace of land reform to the problem of resources, but many are convinced that the government lacks political will to address the land issue. This is, however, set to change as the government has designated several farms for resettlement, indicating a new level of political commitment although it is doubtful whether the government has the capacity to pay for the farms. It is disconcerting to note that the ruling elite is benefiting from land originally earmarked for landless peasants. Thus lobbying efforts should also be directed against this growing phenomenon if social justice and egalitarian ideals are to be realised. It is therefore, important to provide lobbying and advocacy skills to social workers.

Whilst social workers have not directly lobbied national institutions that provide credit to smallholder farmers, they have non-the-less mobilised rural communities to form mutual aid societies in the form of rotating savings and credit schemes. These promote savings which are shared by members on a rotational basis. They also provide credit facilities for the members. The savings and loans are being used by rural communities as capital for their agricultural activities and are also used to meet the health and education needs of families. This has enabled rural

communities to enhance their productive capacity and thus provide an escape route out of poverty. The impact has however, been minimal as only a few have joined these schemes. The challenge for social workers is to mobilise more people to join these schemes and to link the marginalised communities to appropriate resource systems that can provide seed money and technical support.

Efforts to improve the material welfare of rural communities are constrained by the fact that land is idle for half of the year owing to too much dependence on rain-fed agriculture. The majority of rural people have no access to irrigation facilities which can make it possible for rural communities to utilise their land throughout the year. Although the government is supporting the construction of small dams countrywide, the pace is so slow that many rural communities will remain without irrigation facilities for many years to come. Some non-governmental organisations, however, have sourced funds from the donor community to support dam construction. Local communities are often required to contribute their labour as a way of encouraging them to participate in the development of their communities and also help avoid the development of a dependency syndrome. The cardinal principle in social work of doing things with and not for the communities is observed.

Social workers and other development workers recognise that the construction of dams for irrigation purposes is a long-term goal. For the short-term, they have recognised the need to promote non-farm income-earning opportunities. Consequently, community workers employed by the Ministry of National Affairs, Employment Creation and Co-operatives and those employed by non-governmental organisations are mobilising rural communities to set up income-generating projects in order to supplement incomes derived from agriculture. This makes an important contribution in reducing the problems of unemployment and under employment in rural areas. An important activity undertaken by community workers is that of assisting individuals, groups or communities to prepare project proposals and undertake feasibility studies for their intended projects.

Community workers also assist by linking individuals, groups and communities to appropriate resource systems which provide skills training and start-up capital for the projects. Furthermore, community workers mobilise the rural communities to improve infrastructure such as roads, bridges, clinics and schools. Emphasis is not only on programmes or projects that directly improve the material welfare of rural communities but also on those programmes and projects that indirectly contribute to an improvement in the material welfare of the poor.

The impact of these measures to improve the material welfare of rural communities has been quite minimal because of poor funding of the activities by the Ministry of National Affairs, Employment Creation and Co-operatives. The poor funding preclude community workers from traversing the breadth and width of the country and from providing reasonable start-up capital for projects. Although non-governmental organisations have been more successful than the government, their impact has been compromised by the fact that they tend to confine their activities in more or less the same districts leaving some remote parts of the country virtually untouched. This is partly responsible for the uneven development in the country.

The decision by the government to implement the economic structural adjustment programme brought with it new challenges for social workers even though they were not part of the initial decision-making process. The Government of Zimbabwe anticipated that structural adjustment would have a negative impact on the welfare of the people through unemployment, steep price increases and cut backs on social services (Government of Zimbabwe 1991). Consequently, social workers in the Department of Social Welfare were asked to put in place measures to cushion vulnerable groups against the social costs of structural adjustment. The Department of Social Welfare set up the Social Development Fund whose objective was to provide food, money and assistance with the payment of education and health fees. The food money was targeted at low-income urban households with incomes of Z\$200 and below per month whilst assistance with payment of education and health fees was targeted at retrenched workers, unemployed persons and households with monthly incomes not exceeding Z\$400 (Kaseke 1993).

Whilst the Social Development Fund was intended to improve the well-being of vulnerable groups, the realisation of this objective was compromised by the poor design of the programme. The targeting system renders the Fund unable to capture the most needy members of society since the costs of accessing the Fund are high and as a result the poor are unable to access the benefits (Kaseke, 1993). As argued by Chisvo and Munro (1994:19) the Social Development Fund 'is a passive mechanism that waits for potential beneficiaries to come forward and apply for benefits. This approach in itself effectively (though inadvertently) excludes many of the poorest and most vulnerable members of the target population.'

Because of poor funding, the Social Development Fund is unable to honour its commitments timeously. Consequently, it is always in arrears and thereby forcing schools and hospitals to demand payment from people who are not supposed to pay. As a result, children from poor households end up dropping out from school. As the harsh economic conditions continue to bite, the government is increasingly finding itself unable to protect the poor. As a result, many have begun to question the government's commitment to the welfare of the poor, particularly at a time when the government is fighting an unnecessary war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Sadly, social workers are reluctant to use their advocacy and lobbying skills to pressure government to spend money on programmes and projects that can improve human well-being. Social workers have also failed to cause government to revamp the Social Development Fund so that it becomes more responsive to the needs of the poor.

The Social Development Fund also has an employment and training programme targeted specifically at retrenched workers. These are workers who are declared redundant. The aim is to assist retrenched workers to create their own employment by embarking on small to medium-scale enterprises. The programme offers loans to retrenched workers to start their own business but the retrenchees have to make a contribution of 10% of the capital needed. However, before they embark on their business ventures, they have to undergo training so as to enable them to acquire the relevant skills. The impact of this programme in improving the material welfare of retrenched workers has been minimal owing to the fact that most of them fail to raise the 10% contribution. The programme was also narrowly conceived as it confines itself to the new poor, that is, those who have become poor because of retrenchment. As Kaseke (1998:262) observes,



the employment and training programme could have made a greater impact if it had not confined itself to assisting retrenched workers only.

#### An Assessment

Although there has been no systematic evaluation of the social development model, it is apparent that social workers in Zimbabwe have not fully implemented the social development model. This can be attributed to two major reasons. First, the implementation of structural adjustment has placed the government in a vulnerable and dependent position where it no longer has a free hand in determining its economic and social policies. Consequently, policies are being determined largely by external forces. There is therefore limited space for social workers. Second, social workers themselves have been slow in shaking off their old mantle, particularly those employed by government.

Social work education has also not sufficiently prepared social workers for social development roles. There has been too much emphasis in the past on preparing students for remedial social work. However, in the last few years, the curriculum at the School of Social Work in Harare (the only institution providing social work education in Zimbabwe) has been informed by the social development model. The curriculum provides an opportunity for students to understand the concept of social development, its objectives and how these can be realised. It also enables students to make a critical analysis of traditional social work practice models. The curriculum also focuses on socio-economic development, rural development and project planning and management. Our social work graduates, however, have realised that the implementation of their progressive ideas is often constrained by agency policies and the rigidity of central government.

Despite these shortcomings, there is some consensus among social workers that social work should move away from its traditional maintenance function which has tended to perpetuate the marginalisation of the poor and vulnerable groups such as women and persons with disabilities. Empowerment of the poor and vulnerable groups has become a topical issue among social workers but the results have not been outstanding largely because empowerment is not being addressed in a holistic manner. Consequently, progress in one aspect of the people's lives is undermined by lack of progress in the other aspects.

Empowerment also rests on the capacity of social workers to take on an advocacy role. Although, there have been half-hearted attempts at advocacy, social workers together with marginalised groups have attempted to draw the attention of government to unmet needs in communities in the hope that efforts will be made to improve their circumstances. These have, however, met with mixed fortunes.

Social workers can be more successful in this area if they can increase the tempo of their advocacy and lobbying roles. Advocacy and lobbying should result in the creation of an enabling environment, that is, an environment that makes it possible for individuals, groups and communities to realise their potential. This is the biggest challenge for social workers in Zimbabwe.

## Conclusion

The discussion has shown that while Zimbabwe has made a start in the implementation of a social development model, it has a long way to go before the objectives of social development can be fully realised. Successes in the implementation of a social development model have been more on the micro than macro level. There is therefore need for social workers to influence social policies with a view to ensuring that policies are responsive to human needs. Zimbabwe's problem of underdevelopment requires both micro and macro level intervention. The macro level policies such as those associated with structural adjustment are impacting negatively on human well-being and social workers need to assist local communities in articulating their concerns and problems and drive home the message that structural adjustment undermines human welfare.

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